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CLOSED STACKS

Gov Docs

USHA

RURAL HOUSING

An endeavor that is rounding out the Nation-wide rehousing program administered by public housing agencies with the assistance of the United States Housing Authority.

When the United States Housing Act was passed in 1937, establishing Federal aid for slum clearance and low-rent housing, it specifically provided for such assistance to public housing agencies in "rural or urban communities." Congress wrote this provision into the law in formal recognition of the fact that bad housing, far from being confined to urban areas, is actually a condition that seriously menaces the welfare of families all over America, from the most isolated farms to the most populous cities.

While it has been estimated that a third of the Nation as a whole lives under substandard housing conditions, about 60 percent of all American farm families—or approximately 4,000,000—are inadequately housed.

Fully a fourth of all farm houses are estimated to be in poor structural condition because of defective foundations, floors, walls, or roofs. More than half of the farm houses in the United States are over 25 years old, while one farm house in five is more than 50 years old. Though age does not necessarily mean that a dwelling is

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substandard, a substantial number of these old houses have far outlived their usefulness. For the most part, they are shamefully run-down, unpainted shacks, some of them with holes in the roofs, and some without doors or window panes.

The figures cited above, based on a Nation-wide survey of farm housing conducted in 1934 by the Bureau of Home Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture, demonstrate something that most people do not realize—the fact that inadequate housing is even more extensive in rural areas than in cities and towns.

Other investigations have revealed extensive overcrowding in farm homes. In many rural counties there is not a single unoccupied, habitable dwelling. Consequently, large families are often forced to live cramped up in miserable little two- or three-room shacks, or several families have to "double up" in single dwellings that are frequently substandard to begin with.

The program of Federal aid for rural housing not only recognizes that the majority of American farm families are inadequately housed; it also takes into account the fact that most rural families have incomes too small to enable them to do anything about it. A study made by the National Resources Committee for 1935–36 showed that over half of the Nation's farmers receive less than $1,000 a year. More than a third have annual incomes amounting to less than $750. These figures do not represent cash income alone, but make a substantial allowance for certain nonmoney items such as fuel and food grown and consumed on the farm, and the value of housing owned, or occupied without charge, and considered as part of the income of the occupants. And they would be even lower if the incomes of several hundred thousand farm families on relief were taken into account.

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Such considerations as these led the USHA to formulate, within the framework of the Act, a rehousing plan that could be carried out, with minor variations, in rural as well as urban areas. Since the USHA program is dependent upon local initiative and responsibility, progress in both the rural housing movement and the urban program has varied according to the speed with which the communities themselves established local authorities to obtain USHA assistance in rehousing.

At the time the United States Housing Act was passed, there were 46 local housing authorities in existence. The most active ones were in the larger cities, while only one authority represented a rural area. By the end of March 1940 the number of local housing authorities had increased to 335, of which more than 65 are county authorities.

Naturally enough, the larger cities took the lead in the rehousing movement. Congested urban slums were dramatic. More facts and figures were available as to their extent and as to their cost to taxpayers. The cities that had been armed from the outset with able and enthusiastic authorities were in a position to forge ahead. And equally important were the long records of experience in public undertakings that all of the big cities had to spur them on.

Meanwhile, interest in the program on the part of smaller cities and towns increased rapidly. Local authorities in 24 communities with populations of less than 25,000 had obtained USHA commitments by the end of 1938. In 1939 the number of local authorities representing such localities and taking part in the rehousing program reached 48. Thus more than 27 percent of all communities with USHA commitments were towns with less than 25,000 inhabitants. Among the smaller localities for

which loan contracts have been approved are a number with populations of only two or three thousand, including Pelly, Tex., Beverly, N. J., and Mt. Hope, W. Va.

But for the Nation's sparsely populated rural areas, the establishment of local housing authorities to undertake public projects was a new step, a broader assumption of public responsibility for protecting health, safety, and morals. When additional local authorities were set up in rural regions, they took the first steps slowly, though fully aware, from their own plight as well as from what statistics there were on farm housing, that rural needs are even more acute than those of urban areas.

Early in 1940, as the climax to months of effort on the part of the USHA, the Department of Agriculture, and the respective local authorities, came the announcement of details of the first six projects to be undertaken with USHA assistance in strictly rural areas. These six projects, made up of individual farm dwellings in the South and Middle West, have been approved by the President for loan contracts and will soon pass from the blueprint stage into actual construction. The States represented in this first group of rural projects are Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina.

Pending legislation, which has been passed by the Senate and is now before the House of Representatives, would require the setting aside of $200,000,000 of USHA loan authorizations for rural projects. Loans in this amount would make it possible to provide simple, healthful homes for about 102,000 ill-housed farm families at rents they can afford. Furthermore, suggested modifications of the pending bill would permit the USHA, with the cooperation of the Department of Agriculture, to extend

assistance for rural housing wherever the need exists and local authorities are lacking, including even those States which do not yet have proper enabling legislation. A full-fledged rural housing program in all parts of the Nation, to go hand in hand with that already well under way in urban areas, would thus be possible.

Though the United States Housing Act does not authorize the sale of homes built with USHA aid to the families who occupy them, the bill now pending in Congress would permit public housing agencies to sell as well as rent the individual farm dwellings built with USHA assistance. Aid to be extended to farm families by the Department of Agriculture for the purpose of promoting a balanced farm economy is cited as the means by which the farmers may eventually have incomes large enough to warrant converting ordinary rental agreements into purchase contracts, under which the balance of the debt attributable to each dwelling unit would be met in small payments over a period of years.

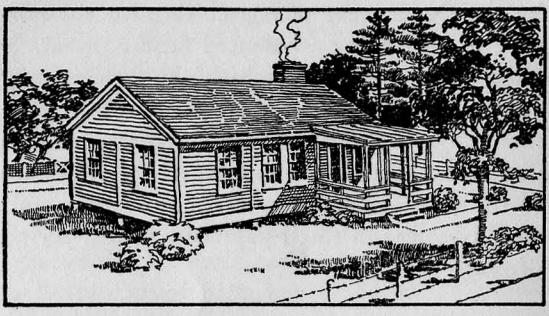
How the Rural Housing Program Works.

The USHA neither builds the new farm houses nor manages them. As in the urban housing program, all rehousing plans originate with, and are carried out by public housing agencies or authorities set up for that purpose. Public housing agencies may borrow up to 90 percent of the cost of approved projects from the USHA; they must raise at least 10 percent from other sources. This may be done by selling their bonds on the open market—bonds that are not debts of the local governments but which are supported by revenues from the housing projects themselves. Housing authorities may also

obtain donations of land and services toward making up part of the cost of projects.

When the new homes are completed, the USHA makes annual contributions to the housing authorities to insure rentals within reach of the communities' low-income families. The local governments make contributions toward low rents, too, generally in the form of tax exemption. Such contributions must be equal to at least one-fifth of the Federal contributions.

Four kinds of low-income families will occupy the new homes built under the rural housing program: Small farm owners, tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and rural wage workers.

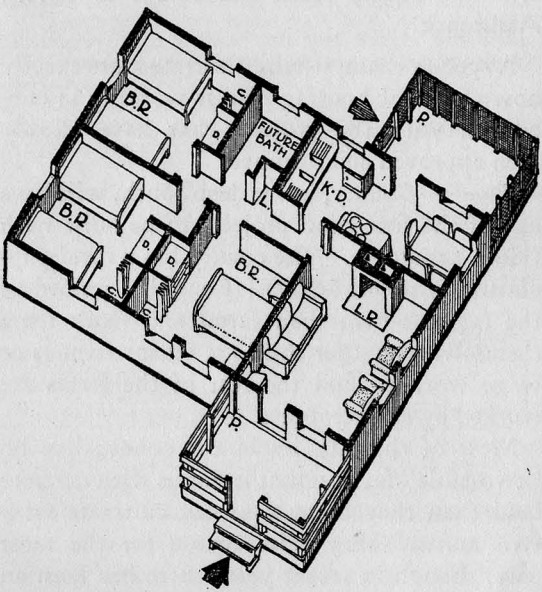


Drawing of standard low-rent farm house. Plans call for one-acre site, with fencing for garden and poultry, a clean, sealed well, and a sanitary privy.

Most of the rural housing developments will be made up of single frame dwellings built on individual farms scattered throughout the county. Title to the sites, which will average about an acre each, must be obtained by the housing authorities from the various farm owners, either as a donation or at a nominal amount. Before the new houses are built, appropriate protective agreements will be worked out between all parties concerned.

Arrangements must also be made to tear down or effectively close as living quarters as many substandard dwellings as there are new units built with USHA aid.

The provision of such simple new homes will open the way to a cleaner, healthier, and more productive existence for the Nation's farm families. Landlords will also benefit through the increased productivity and the tendency of



Standard design for farm home under the USHA rural housing program. Note space provided for future bath.

well-housed families to be content to remain where they are, rather than to "move on to greener pastures."

The States with housing enabling acts provid-

ing for county authorities through which rural housing may be undertaken are as follows:

Arkansas	Maryland	Oregon
California	Mississippi	Pennsylvania
Delaware*	Nebraska	South Carolina
Georgia	New Jersey	Virginia
Illinois	North Dakota	Washington
Indiana	Ohio†	

X——— County Takes Advantage of USHA Assistance.

A specific example will illustrate more exactly how the rural housing plan is working in connection with the projects that have already been approved and initiated.

X——— County, in the deep South, will have one of the first rural projects to be built with USHA assistance. The county has a rural population of about 16,000. Roughly, a third of the families own their farms and work them themselves, another third are tenant farmers or wage workers, and the rest of the farms are worked by sharecroppers.

Most of the families in the county live on "two-mule" farms—that is, farms with no more land than they themselves can cultivate with two mules. They raise cotton for the most part, though in recent years there has been an increase in the acreage planted to other crops.

It is estimated that over 80 percent of the county's population now live in crude, unpainted shacks, many of them windowless and unscreened. In some cases the most elemental sanitary facilities are lacking. These

*Or part of a county.

†Provides for the establishment of housing authorities in the counties by the State Board of Housing, which also prescribes the area of operation of each of them within the county.

dangerously unsafe and insanitary housing conditions have long perplexed county officials. For example, late in 1939 the Health Department reported:

"Malaria is one of the major public health problems in X——— County. The reported malaria death rate for the County for the last decade averages 31 per 100,000 population, whereas for the State the corresponding rate is 13.

"The major problem of this department is that of providing the rural homes with the proper type of human excrement disposal systems. To combat such conditions, this department has operated a sanitary privy project.

"A screening project was operated for a short time but was discontinued due to lack of adequate and efficient personnel.

"The people in rural homes have been urged to construct or improve their wells so that they will be watertight at the ground surface in order to protect the supply from surface contamination . . .

"Due to the upward trend of typhus fever morbidity rate this department is insisting that every home and business establishment should be constructed rat-proof."

Such deplorable conditions as these led to the establishment of the X——— County Housing Authority, a public agency composed of five members, to enlist the assistance of the USHA and the Department of Agriculture in carrying out a low-rent housing program for the community.

Applications from farm families with incomes too meager to enable them to provide themselves with safe and sanitary dwellings were received and carefully considered by the authority. On the basis of this determination of the county's rural housing needs, combined with a study of the incomes of its ill-housed families, the X——— County authority has worked out plans for its first project.

As a result of these efforts, some 200 families will soon be moving from their present dismal and insanitary quarters into comfortable new individual farm homes, free from leaky roofs and faulty walls and flooring. Each dwelling "unit" will include a simple frame house with living room, dining room, kitchen, three bed-

rooms, space for future bathroom, storage space, and a work porch; a sanitary privy; and a clean, sealed well. There will be fenced-in areas for gardening and for poultry.

The local authority plans to distribute the 200 new houses as evenly as possible, on the basis of need, over the entire county. All of them will be built on farms approved by the Department of Agriculture as likely to be successful from an economic point of view.

The new dwellings will be leased at rentals well within the means of low-income farm families. Present indications are that cash rents of less than $50 a year per unit will be achieved. It will be possible to set the cash rent at such a low figure because the occupants themselves will perform the ordinary maintenance and repair work. The method of rent payment on the X———County project dwellings will naturally be different from that in urban projects. Payments will likely be made when the farm crops are sold, rather than month by month.

As in all USHA-assisted projects, admission to the X——— County project will be limited to families whose annual net income over a fixed period (3 to 5 years) immediately preceding the time of admission averaged no more than five times the rental (including the value or cost to the tenant of heat, light, water, and cooking fuel), except in the case of large families, where the ratio may be six to one. In calculating a farm family's income to determine eligibility, net profit from the sale of farm produce is included, plus the value of products raised on the farm and consumed in the home.

Agreements made in connection with the X——— County project will include assurance of advice and assistance from the Department of Agriculture, for the USHA recognizes the im-

portance of the relationship that exists between rural housing and farm economy. This will be done not only for the purpose of insuring that returns from farming will be sufficient to meet the rent on USHA-assisted dwellings, but also for the broader purpose of improving the entire farm economy and increasing the returns through the use of sound and scientific farming methods.

Other Rural Housing Programs Get Under Way.

In addition to the six projects for which loans have already been approved by the President, there are a number of rural housing developments in various parts of the country in initial planning stages.

In the rural projects that have been planned, the over-all costs (including the cost of land, architectural, engineering, and administrative costs, carrying charges, and minimum equipment, as well as construction of the houses themselves) are expected to average about $2,150 per dwelling unit, ranging from less than $2,000 in the South to about $2,600 in the North, where climatic conditions require a more expensive type of construction.

The six projects now nearing construction will make it possible for about 1,300 low-income farm families to cross the threshold into that comfortable, wholesome existence which "life on the farm" is generally supposed to be, and which it can, in truth, become under the public housing program. An expanded program embodying the minor modifications that have been suggested would enable other thousands of ill-housed families in rural America to move into decent, safe, and sanitary new homes. Close cooperation between the Department of Agri-

culture and the USHA is of vital significance in these rehousing activities, for the problem is such that the resources and experience of both agencies are necessary to its effective solution.

This leaflet is one of a series on various phases of the United States Housing Authority program. For additional copies of this leaflet, or for copies of others in this series, write to the:

FEDERAL WORKS AGENCY

UNITED STATES HOUSING AUTHORITY

Washington, D. C.

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE 16—14153